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# Oakland Sports Equity Coalition: A Qualitative Case Study Informed by Community Coalition Action Theory and a Health Equity Framework

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## Abstract

# Background:

Youth sports provide opportunities for physical, social, and community development, yet access remains inequitable. Community coalitions may help address inequities by connecting organizations across fragmented systems, but little research has examined their role in youth sports equity. This study examined how members of the Oakland Sports Equity Coalition (OSEC), formed in 2021 to advance youth sports equity in Oakland, California, understand the coalition's purpose, structure, and role, and the factors facilitating or constraining collective action.

# Methods:

We conducted a qualitative, cross-sectional case study using semistructured interviews with OSEC members active during spring and summer 2025. Twenty-nine interviews were conducted between April and September 2025. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and deidentified. We used combined deductive and inductive thematic analysis informed by Community Coalition Action Theory (CCAT) and the Health Equity Framework (HEF). Two researchers double-coded all transcripts and iteratively refined the codebook.

# Results:

Participants described OSEC as a convening space rather than an organization directing members' work or implementing programs. Relationships were a key contribution, facilitating collaboration, knowledge sharing, and resource exchange across Oakland's youth sports system. Although members shared a commitment to equity, they differed in how they operationalized it. Uneven engagement, competing responsibilities, limited organizational capacity, and unclear roles hindered sustained momentum and coordinated action. Structural barriers, including funding constraints, limited facilities, transportation barriers, pay-to-play systems, and historical inequities, further constrained collective action. Participants recommended expanding representation, particularly among youth, parents, and coaches, while strengthening member roles, accountability, coordination, and pathways from relationships to collective action.

# Conclusions:

OSEC's value lies in creating and maintaining relational infrastructure across a fragmented youth sports system. Coalitions may provide value through relationship-building before producing large-scale programs or policy changes. However, relationships alone may be insufficient to sustain collective action. Coalitions addressing complex inequities may benefit from balancing flexibility with sufficient

structure to sustain engagement, clarify responsibilities, and support coordinated action amongst its members.

# Introduction

Youth sports can provide children and adolescents with opportunities for physical activity, social connection, and psychological development. Participation has been associated with improved self-esteem, social interaction, and other psychological and social outcomes, although the extent and causal nature of these benefits vary across settings and types of participation. [10,11] For many youth, sports also provide opportunities to develop relationships with peers and adults, build skills, and participate in structured activities within their communities. However, access to youth sports opportunities is not equitably distributed.

Youths from low-income communities and historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups often face greater barriers to participating in organized sports. [15] Financial costs, transportation, limited access to facilities and programming, and unequal representation within youth sports organizations can all influence who is able to participate.[15] These inequities are particularly relevant in Oakland, California, a northern California city with approximately 440,000 residents in the Bay Area. A 2022 State of Play Oakland report identified substantial differences in youth sports participation and access by race, gender, and income.[12] For example, White children are three times more likely than Latino/a youth and twice as likely as Black and Asian youth to participate in a recreation center sports team. Access also varied substantially across neighborhoods, with 41% of youth in higher income neighborhoods (Montclair, Dimond, Laurel) reporting participation on a recreation center team compared with only 13% of youth in lower income areas (East Oakland).[12] The report also identified uneven access to quality parks and sports opportunities across Oakland, highlighting the breadth of challenges facing the city's youth sports system.[12] Together, these conditions highlight the potential need for coordination across organizations that often operate independently within the same community.

Community coalitions represent one approach for addressing complex inequities that extend beyond the capacity of individual organizations. By bringing together organizations and community stakeholders with different resources, expertise, and perspectives, coalitions may create opportunities for coordination and greater collective impact around shared community concerns. [6,16] The evidence suggests that community coalitions can contribute to change across a range of settings and outcomes, including policy, systems, and environmental change; community capacity; health behaviors; and health outcomes, especially when coalitions connect multisector organizations with communities experiencing health inequities.[14,16] For example, Grow Healthy Together Chattanooga brought together local government, public health, schools, parks and recreation, and neighborhood organizations to improve access to physical activity opportunities in predominantly African American and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods; following policy and environmental changes, youth in these communities had greater odds of engaging in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.[19] However, coalition

effectiveness is influenced by a range of factors, including member participation, leadership, membership diversity, collaboration, and organizational structure.[13,14] Although coalition-based approaches have been used across public health and community development settings, less is known about how this approach functions within the context of youth sports equity.

A recent example of coalition-based work to improve youth physical activity access further demonstrates the potential for cross-sector collaboration to address health-related inequities affecting young people by developing focused action around specific priorities. The King County Play Equity Coalition in Washington was also formed following the publication of a regional 2019 State of Play report by the Aspen Institute[20]and brought together more than 100 organizations across youth-serving nonprofits, social service agencies, healthcare, businesses, and professional sports to improve equitable access to play and physical activity.[17]The coalition subsequently developed a focused Advocacy Action Team that convened coalition members, youth, parents, educators, pediatricians, community organizations, and policymakers to advance legislation supporting equitable access to school recess.[17]These coordinated efforts contributed to the passage of Washington's statewide equitable recess law in 2023.[17]The King County example illustrates how coalition-based collaboration can translate shared priorities into policy action. However, few studies have examined how members of youth sports coalitions understand their coalition's purpose and structure, experience internal relationships and challenges, and perceive opportunities to strengthen collective action. Because coalition action depends on the sustained participation and coordination of its members[13,14], understanding how members experience the coalition may help identify conditions that facilitate or constrain engagement and collaboration, potentially informing how coalitions can better transform their shared commitments to equity into meaningful community-level change.

The Oakland Sports Equity Coalition (OSEC) was formed in 2021 as a cross-sector coalition convened by a national nonprofit organization, the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA),[18]to address inequities in youth sports access and participation in Oakland. OSEC brings together key stakeholders in Oakland's youth sports ecosystem, including youth sports organizations, the Oakland Unified School District, professional sports organizations, small business leaders, and community-centered consultant organizations, to address inequities in youth sports access through information sharing, relationship building, collective strategizing, and identifying opportunities to advance youth sports equity. The Coalition's Sports Equity Agenda centers on three overarching goals: developing a pipeline of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) coaches through volunteerism, increasing youth participation by addressing racial inequities across the youth sports system, and increasing the participation of BIPOC girls in youth sports and women in coaching. As a cross-sector coalition operating within this fragmented local system, OSEC provides an opportunity to examine how coalition members negotiate shared goals, relationships, organizational structures, and constraints in pursuing youth sports equity.

This qualitative case study examines how members of OSEC understand the coalition's purpose, structure, and role in advancing youth sports equity. We examine the relational, organizational, and

structural factors that facilitate or constrain the coalition's efforts and explore members' perspectives on how the coalition could be strengthened. The interview guide and initial coding framework were informed by Community Coalition Action Theory (CCAT) and the Health Equity Framework (HEF), whereas inductive coding was used to identify concepts that emerged from participants' accounts beyond those represented in the frameworks. The study provides insight into how a cross-sector coalition focused on youth sports equity aligns with and diverges from established approaches to coalition development and health equity.

# Methods

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative, cross-sectional case study design to examine how members of the Oakland Sports Equity Coalition (OSEC) understand the coalition's purpose, structure, and role in advancing youth sports equity, as well as the factors shaping its function and perceived impact. A case study approach was selected to allow for an in-depth exploration of a single coalition operating within a complex, community-based context. This study was reviewed and approved by the University of California, Berkeley Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS Protocol ID #2025–03–18367).

Participants and Recruitment

OSEC convenes monthly coalition meetings where attendees represent their own organizations and where participation is voluntary and unpaid. OSEC is led by a salaried PCA employee. Historically, active OSEC participation has varied, along with the number of active members.

The study participants included OSEC coalition members active during the spring/summer of 2025 who were recruited via purposive sampling to capture a range of perspectives across sectors, roles, and levels of engagement within the coalition. OSEC and PCA leadership provided an initial list of 100 potential participants representing diverse coalition memberships, newer and actively engaged members, and older members with past engagement. The eligibility criteria included (1) age 18 years or older, (2) active or prior participation in OSEC, and (3) ability to complete an interview in English.

Study recruitment was conducted through a coordinated email outreach campaign targeting all 100 of the identified potential participants. Of the 100 individuals contacted, 34 responded to recruitment emails, and 66 declined to participate or did not respond. At an OSEC in-person meeting in March 2025, coalition leaders first introduced the study, followed by direct communication from the research team to answer questions. No in-person recruitment was performed. Researchers sent interested participants an email that thoroughly explained the study and consent process. Recruitment continued until interviews were no longer generating major new conceptual categories, and the research team determined that the dataset provided sufficient depth and variation to address the study aims.

Data collection

Study data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted between April and September 2025. The semistructured interview guide was developed specifically for this study, drawing on Community Coalition Action Theory (CCAT) [1,2] and a health equity framework[3]. Open-ended questions were designed to explore (1) participants' understanding of OSEC's purpose and structure, (2) experiences with engagement and participation, (3) perceived benefits and challenges of coalition involvement, (4) definitions and operationalizations of youth sports equity, (5) the perceived impact of OSEC, and (6) recommendations for strengthening the coalition. The English-language interview guide is provided as Additional file 3.

The interviews were all conducted via Zoom, lasted between 40 and 70 minutes, and were conducted by two members of the research team (ET and CO). The interviews were audio-recorded via Zoom's recording function. Audio files were transcribed verbatim using GoTranscript AI, reviewed for accuracy, and deidentified prior to analysis.

The participants' demographic data (gender identity, race, age, primary occupation, education level, member organization, and organization title) were collected at the beginning of the interview via a verbal question-and-answer format. The participants were informed of the study purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to the interviews. The participants received a $25 gift card as compensation for their time.

# Data analysis

The data were analyzed via a combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis approach. Initial codes were informed by the study aims, interview guide, and theoretical frameworks (CCAT and health equity), whereas additional codes and themes were developed inductively from participant narratives. Formal member checking was not conducted.

The same two researchers who conducted the interviews (ET and CO) double-coded all the transcripts and resolved coding discrepancies to improve coding consistency. Following a first round of coding, codes were grouped into broader categories and synthesized into themes through an iterative process of comparison across transcripts. Analytic memos were used in both phases to document emerging patterns and relationships between codes and to develop interpretations.

The final thematic structure reflects both theoretically informed domains and participant-driven insights, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how coalition members experience and interpret OSEC. Dedoose v10.0 was used to organize, code, and analyze the interview transcripts. A completed Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist is provided as Additional file 2.

Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to enhance the rigor of the analysis. The transcripts were double-coded by members of the research team (ET and CO) to improve coding consistency. All coding differences were discussed and resolved in code meetings by consensus. ET was a medical student with training in qualitative research methods. CO was a public health doctoral student with no prior training in qualitative research methods. Both researchers received training and practice in semistructured interviews prior to data collection. ET and CO had no prior relationships with PCA or any OSEC members. Both researchers were interested in youth sports equity and coalition-based approaches to community health. Reflexive discussions were incorporated throughout the code consolidation meetings to consider how researchers' perspectives and professional backgrounds may shape the interpretation of the data. Additionally, an iterative analytic process was used, incorporating memo-writing and ongoing comparisons across transcripts to refine themes. This approach supported deeper engagement with the data and helped ensure that the findings were grounded in participant perspectives.

### Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of California, Berkeley Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS Protocol ID #2025–03–18367).

Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. The participants were informed of the study purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question and could leave the interview at any point. Participants who completed interviews were offered a $25 gift card in appreciation for their time; some participants declined the compensation.

## Results

### Participant characteristics

The study sample consisted of 29 adult OSEC members, representing a range of organizations and sectors involved in sports/recreation and youth development, including youth sports organizers and leagues (44.8%), community-based and coaching organizations (24.1%), academic institutions (13.8%), government and public agencies (10.3%), healthcare (3.4%), and professional sports (3.4%; Table 1). Most participants were female (59%) and between 32 and 65 years old. The participants were racially/ethnically diverse: Black/African American (27.6%), White (20.7%), Multiracial (17.2%), Asian (13.8%), South Asian/Indian (10.3%), Latino/a/x (6.9%), and Middle Eastern (3.4%). All participants reported having at least a bachelor's degree, with 65.5% reporting at least some graduate-level education.

Table 1
Characteristics of study participants (N = 29)

| **Characteristic** | |
|---|---|
| **Age** | |
| Mean ± SD (Range) | 46.4 ± 9.1 (32–65) |
| **Gender, n (%)** | |
| Woman/Female | 17 (58.6%) |
| Man/Male | 11 (37.9%) |
| Nonbinary | 1 (3.4%) |
| **Race/Ethnicity, n (%)** | |
| Black/African | 8 (27.6%) |
| White | 6 (20.7%) |
| Multiracial | 5 (17.2%) |
| Asian | 4 (13.8%) |
| South Asian/Indian | 3 (10.3%) |
| Latino/a/x | 2 (6.9%) |
| Middle Eastern | 1 (3.4%) |
| **Education Level, n (%)** | |
| Master's degree | 14 (48.3%) |
| Bachelor's degree | 10 (34.5%) |
| Doctorate degree | 3 (10.3%) |
| Some graduate level | 2 (6.9%) |
| **Organization Sector, n (%)** | |
| Youth Sports organization | 13 (44.8%) |
| Coach Development/Community organization | 7 (24.1%) |
| Higher education/University | 4 (13.8%) |
| Government/Public sector | 3 (10.3%) |
| Healthcare | 1 (3.4%) |
| Professional sports team | 1 (3.4%) |

Major themes

We identified six major themes related to the coalition's purpose, structure, and role in advancing youth sports equity, as well as the factors shaping its function and perceived impact.

## OSEC as a Convening Space Rather Than a Traditional Coalition

Many participants emphasized that OSEC's value stemmed from its ability to connect unacquainted individuals and organizations and to bring less commonly heard voices to these meetings. Members described the coalition as creating a shared space where organizations working in youth sports, education, public health, philanthropy, and community development could exchange ideas, identify common challenges, and build partnerships, highlighting the coalition's role as a gathering space rather than a centralized governing body.

The participants consistently described OSEC less as a formalized organization and more as a collaborative convening space that brings together stakeholders across Oakland's youth sports ecosystem. Rather than functioning through rigid hierarchies or formalized systems of accountability, members described OSEC as a flexible coalition centered on relationship building, information sharing, and collective dialogue around youth sports equity.

"The main function [of OSEC] to me is to truly create a space that allows for collaboration, connection, and, more importantly, respect, amongst the different variety of work that we all do to be able to create a voice that is inclusive of all the community members that we all serve collectively." ( Participant 15 )

The participants also frequently expressed uncertainty regarding the coalition's organizational structure, leadership processes, and expectations for member involvement. While OSEC was often viewed positively as an open and collaborative space, some members noted that the coalition's flexibility also created ambiguity around decision-making authority, accountability, and long-term direction. The participants described varying understandings of the coalition's goals and differing perceptions of what OSEC was intended to accomplish.

"I think they did a good job of bringing a lot of folks to the table. I think what, at least if I can recall correctly, [...] it was pretty directionless. There weren't any directives. There weren't things that I felt like I could walk away and start working on. It felt high-level conversations around what they wanna be doing, but from a tactical perspective, it was lacking." (Participant 27)

Several participants also discussed tensions between OSEC's informal, relationship-driven structure and members' desires for more coordinated action. Although the coalition's open membership was viewed as a strength, some members felt that the absence of clearly defined roles or organizational processes limited the coalition's ability to move initiatives forward consistently.

Despite these challenges, participants generally viewed OSEC's convening role as both valuable and necessary within the broader youth sports landscape. Members frequently framed the coalition as an infrastructure for collaboration and collective problem solving rather than as a traditional organization designed to independently implement programs. This distinction shaped how participants understood both the coalition's strengths and its limitations.

## Equity as a Shared Value but an Uneven Practice

The participants consistently described strong alignment between their personal and organizational values and OSEC's broader mission of advancing youth sports equity. Across interviews, members emphasized a shared commitment to improving access to youth sports opportunities for historically underserved youth and communities in Oakland. The participants frequently framed OSEC as a coalition focused on addressing inequities related to transportation, access to facilities and programming, representation, and other structural factors that shape participation in organized sports.

Many participants described joining or remaining engaged in OSEC because the coalition's goals closely aligned with the equity-oriented priorities and values already guiding their work in their respective organizations.

"OSEC was just an extension of what I was already trying to do by being on the board of [a local soccer club]. And so when our president suggested that I come on board and come to these meetings, yeah, like all of those same conversations that we have at OSEC are a lot of the same conversations that we have on the board. The way I look at sports in Oakland, like, completely aligned with OSEC. So the integration wasn't something that I had to sort of work in. Like it was an easy extension, I guess." (Participant 20)

For many members, this alignment in values and goals created a sense of affirmation and shared purpose within the coalition. The participants described OSEC as a space where they felt understood and supported by others working toward similar equity-focused objectives, particularly within systems that often perpetuate youth sports inequities. Several members discussed how participating in the coalition reinforced their commitment to equity work, validated the challenges they experienced within their own organizations or communities, and provided more education on inequity.

"I think it's a great opportunity for all of us organizations that have the same mission to come together and give insight and input. I feel like it's a safe place to express, you know, the true reality of what's going on. [...] I think it's a great, great network of people that, again, want to make a positive impact in the community." (Participant 18)

Although the participants shared a broad commitment to equity, they expressed important personal and organizational differences in the operationalization of youth sports equity. Most participants discussed equity primarily in terms of increasing access to sport participation. Participants varied in how they understood the root causes of inequity, including the roles of socioeconomic status, race, and neighborhood. Others emphasized representation, culturally responsive programming, community voice,

or addressing structural inequities embedded within youth sports systems. The participants frequently drew from their own professional and lived experiences when defining what equity meant in practice.

“[Equity is] about making sure that everyone has the opportunity to participate. Regardless of demographics, regardless of zip code, regardless of race. [...] It's just opportunities in every corner of the city for kids to do the same thing. And that's what, to me, is where I look at the equity.” ( Participant 15)

While participants generally expressed strong alignment with OSEC’s broader equity goals, some coalition priorities received greater scrutiny than others did. In particular, several participants questioned the coalition’s emphasis on increasing volunteer coaching within youth sports. Although members recognized volunteer coaching as a potential strategy for expanding youth sports access, most participants argued that volunteering itself is a form of privilege that may be less accessible to working class and BIPOC communities, referencing the need for discretionary time, financial stability, and schedule flexibility to engage in unpaid coaching. Some noted that it emphasizes the numbers over the quality of development-forward coaching. Many have noted that this runs counter to OSEC’s goals of increasing the number of coaches who come from the same underserved communities as the young people they serve.

“I'm hesitant to say, like, volunteerism is dead. Like, that's my whole life is service of others. You know, I just think that if we're in communities that are already marginalized, it doesn't seem exactly equitable to then ask them to volunteer–like volunteering and volunteerism is a privilege, right. To be able to take time out of your day, unpaid, to do things for others is a privilege in itself.” ( Participant 33)

Some participants further described tension between OSEC’s equity-oriented mission and strategies that appeared to neglect other communities that they regularly work with, such as people living with disabilities.

Participants also acknowledged that efforts to advance equity within youth sports are shaped by external systems of power and institutional inequities. Members described barriers related to funding disparities, pay-to-play models, uneven community investment, and longstanding inequities in access to sports infrastructure and programming. These realities hinder the coalition’s ability to fully enact its shared equity goals.

“There's a number of factors why our students of color or youth of color don't have access to [sports]. But I think for me, it's a little bit more than that. It goes into the systems that are in place that continue to perpetuate the lack of programs in those specific neighborhoods. And so we're trying to break that cycle and get [the] support. We're talking about generations of neglect [...] so it's tough to connect with some of those families that have other obligations [...] to make sure that they continue on with their lives that prevents them from either investing in their child's sports opportunities or even [their use] of time because they're stretched thin and things like that.” (Participant 15)

Despite these challenges, participants generally viewed OSEC's emphasis on equity as one of the coalition's defining strengths. Members described the coalition as creating opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and shared learning around issues of inequity in youth sports, even when approaches to addressing those inequities varied across participants and organizations.

## Relational capital as the Coalition's primary asset and members' crucible

The participants consistently described relationships as one of the most valuable outcomes of involvement in OSEC and among the coalition's primary functions and benefits. The participants frequently described OSEC as creating opportunities to meet individuals and organizations they may not have otherwise encountered through their own work.

"I think the building of relationships is key, is what I was going to say. There's not always this deliverable that comes out of a meeting where I'm like, 'oh, I'm going to implement that next week,' you know, but the way that it kind of informs our work and my life is the real relationships, partnerships, trust building, collaboration, that we've been able to forge by being present within the coalition. And that's been awesome, like personally, 'cause everybody's just, you know—when you're kind of working toward a similar mission and kind of guided by shared values, you know, it's typically—you meet some really cool people, and also like for our work, it's just been so so valuable." ( Participant 4 )

The participants discussed how information shared by different organizations and sectors during coalition meetings, such as new programs and funding opportunities, helped them better understand the broader youth sports landscape and identify opportunities for collaboration. The participants frequently described these relationships as facilitating collaboration, resource sharing, and the breakdown of silos across different touchpoints in youth sports.

"[OSEC's] influence comes in, like, who is there and who you get to connect with. I think that that's been important. And even, like, understanding the landscape of Oakland sports and what opportunities are out there. Yeah, it will set off little bells in my head, like, 'oh, maybe this could be done with this person in the future.' Or maybe it's not even something I connect the dots of at that moment. But later, you know, in my org, as we talk about something specific, I'm like, 'oh, that's interesting, there was someone at OSEC that did XYZ that, maybe, there's an opportunity for collaboration. So, yeah, I think [my participation helps me] better understand the landscape in Oakland." ( Participant 28 )

In addition to organizational collaboration, participants described personal and professional benefits associated with coalition participation. Members discussed gaining new perspectives on youth sports equity, expanding their professional networks, and developing relationships that extended beyond coalition meetings. Several participants noted that connections made through OSEC influenced their work within their own organizations and helped shape how they approached thinking and incorporated

more equity into their work. One participant discussed being made more aware of the disparity of women coaches and subsequently made changes to how he hires coaches in his organization:

“I didn't realize it was so hard to find women that coach. And we were talking to a lady [...] she says she had 17 coaches and only one of them was a woman. [...] So I think in that way, you're hearing or learning from a broader perspective what's going on in the local community that, other than being in those meetings, you wouldn't know about, or you wouldn't know anybody was going through at that time. [...] So, like the young lady I just found, she wanted to coach, but no opportunity had been presented to her and or she didn't know how to go about finding the opportunity and or maybe she had just been passed on it. And she did a really bad job with her resume. Now, the average person would have just moved on and been like, ‘no, I got to find somebody else.’ And I just said, no, no, [...] I'm gonna [help] her so that, you know, she's ready to go. I'm going to invest in her.” (Participant 5)

Many participants described relationships as both an outcome of coalition participation and a primary way OSEC creates value owing to the collaborations that result from the relationships. While members acknowledged the importance of coalition initiatives and goals, they more frequently pointed to strengthened relationships and increased trust, which fostered an environment for the creation of intranetwork programming, resource sharing, and collaborative community outreach. In this way, relationships are a byproduct of coalition participation, which ultimately helps OSEC improve its goals for youth sports equity

“I think that one thing that's kind of happening that doesn't really get reflected numbers-wise is the collaborations that happen or the programs that start as part of the coalition. So for example, the sports program within OUSD, the elementary school sports program. And then also this summer, [three OSEC member organizations] did an all-girls sports summer camp. And those folks met in coalition meetings and as part of the coalition activities. So, I think that happening, increasing the capacity of each other and working together to be able to serve more kids, is ultimately the coalition's mission.” ( Participant 33 )

## External Barriers Limit and Inspire Collective Action

Although participants viewed OSEC as a valuable space for collaboration, they also recognized several challenges that influenced the coalition’s ability to sustain engagement and advance its goals. In terms of barriers to coalition effectiveness, participants frequently shifted the discussion to broader structural barriers affecting youth sports in Oakland.

“I think there's a number of factors why our youth of color don't have access to [sports]. But I think for me, it's a little bit more than that. It goes into the systems that are in place that continue to perpetuate the lack of programs in those specific neighborhoods. And so we're trying to break that cycle and get [that] support. And again, we're talking about generations of neglect. So it's tough to connect with some of those families that have other obligations [...] that prevents them from investing in their child's sports

opportunities because they're stretched, and things like that. So just thinking about how do we eliminate some of those barriers, while at the same time, educating our parents because there's been a generation, in my opinion, that has been disconnected from what it used to be and why neighborhood parks were built in neighborhoods and why rec centers were built in the neighborhoods. And that notion has kind of disappeared in our city. [...] And the notion of that neighborhood is just not focused on sports opportunities, or getting kids doing some positive things." ( Participant 15 )

Many participants recognized that these structural realities influenced what the coalition could realistically accomplish. While members expressed optimism about OSEC's ability to build relationships and bring organizations together, they also acknowledged that addressing deeply rooted inequities would require resources, institutional support, and policy changes that the coalition was not currently equipped to address. Several participants described OSEC as an important part of a broader effort to advance youth sports equity rather than a singular solution for addressing these challenges independently.

"I think our impact has been that it takes a group, [...] and it takes us to organize as a coalition to push forth that mental model, that sports should be considered in the same spaces as inequity everywhere in other systems. So that's an unpopular sort of direction generally, which is why I think the coalition itself is integral, because we can't have just random voices like myself, or individuals shouting at the top of their lungs, and we [instead] need a group effort, and we need movement." (Participant 1)

Oakland's history of grassroots activism both motivated members to pursue change and tempered expectations regarding the pace of systemic progress.

"I think Oakland's one of those like really unique cities in the United States where there's such a honoring of the historical kind of cultural significance in terms of activism and rights, yet when it comes to kind of lived experiences of those things being borne out decades later, it has a lag time that I think—you can see it in the city, [with everyday life], but you can also see it in sports." ( Participant 29 )

This perspective positioned OSEC's work as part of a longer history of organizing around racial and social inequities in Oakland rather than as an isolated effort focused solely on youth sports.

# Internal Capacity Constrains Collective Action

Many participants also recognized that internal capacity challenges drastically influenced the coalition's ability to sustain engagement and advance its goals. Members frequently mentioned that coalition participation competes with the demands of their primary professional roles. Many participants explained that involvement in OSEC required balancing coalition activities alongside their existing organizational responsibilities, making it difficult to consistently attend meetings, contribute to projects, or take on leadership roles. Rather than viewing this as a lack of commitment, participants generally acknowledged these constraints as an expected reality of coalition participation.

“If you think about [balancing responsibility] on a family level, like if a parent is so focused on getting our daily needs met, right? Like how can we possibly expect them to have time for extra stuff? It's the same thing on an organizational level, especially grassroots like youth sport organizations. We're just trying to make sure that our kids get programming and our kids have coaches. How can we give more of ourselves, overextending ourselves than we already are? Because a lot of these people work 50-hour weeks. Some of them are like the executive directors and they're also coaching the team and they're also doing admin support and they're also doing quality control and coach support. So it's really a labor of love and sometimes we don't got time for it. So I think consistency has been a challenge to keep the ball rolling.” ( Participant 33 )

The participants also described uneven engagement across coalition members. While some regularly participated in meetings and activities, others had more limited involvement due to organizational priorities, personal capacity, or unclear responsibilities. This inconsistency made it difficult to maintain momentum between meetings and translate discussions into clear action items. Members emphasized that meaningful progress required not only strong relationships and a shared commitment to equity but also the organizational capacity to sustain collective action.

“We'll go to a meeting and it just feels like the same meeting as before. I like the last meeting I was at, I actually really enjoyed the conversation. It was kind of like a theoretical conversation. We talked about [how] volunteer coaching is dead and then a couple of other subjects. And then, I don't know if it was the right timing for me [but], we didn't walk away from that meeting moving anything forward, like recruiting coaches as an OSEC committee. And sometimes the meetings feel [as if] we're just starting it over again, like the same conversation.” (Participant 3)

## Member-Driven Visions for a More Action-Oriented Coalition

The participants offered recommendations for strengthening the OSEC’s representation, structure, and capacity for collective action.

Expanding representation was a common theme. The participants emphasized broadening coalition participation to include community organizations, parents, youth, coaches, schools, and other stakeholders whose lived experiences could strengthen OSEC’s understanding of barriers to youth sports participation. Members viewed broader inclusion as important for ensuring that coalition priorities reflected the needs of the communities it sought to serve.

“The members of the coalition are speaking on behalf of their constituencies, which I think is good and a really great proxy in many ways for community needs. But then I think it's really important to also name that these executive directors or leaders of these orgs—they're also a certain distance away from the actual community that we intend to serve. [...] I wonder what it'd be like to have almost like an advisory committee. [...] Parents, students, coaches, like actual coaches, you know? Because the folks at the table, the coalition are mostly like the people who are coordinating the coaches or providing the service,

if that makes sense. So definitely [OSEC is] trying to be rooted in and have proximity to the communities that we're working with, but there's always gonna be like a filter there." (Participant 4)

Strengthening the coalition structure. The participants also described a need for clearer member roles, communication, accountability, and processes for moving ideas into implementation. Members felt that greater structure could sustain engagement and build on the relationships already established within OSEC.

"If we could take the time to identify a leader of each group. Somebody who was accountable for getting us to meet regularly and create a series of events or goals that we're beholden to. Because right now it's, like, up to me. Sometimes I reach out. Sometimes, you know, [other members] or some of the people I work with in [the school district] will reach out. We'll sit down, we'll meet, we'll come up with a couple of great ideas. And then, you know, there's not necessarily a ton of follow through. Because everyone is dealing with their own sort of job and other to-do's. And specifically towards that end, I think we need a more discreet leader and more regular meetings and I think a nice good set of SMART goals." (Participant 11)

Supporting collective action. Finally, participants envisioned that OSEC evolved beyond convening and relationship-building toward more coordinated action. Suggestions included policy advocacy training, collecting and analyzing participation data, developing shared resources, and creating opportunities for members to strengthen relationships. One participant emphasized the need for data to assess progress:

"As far as data collection and understanding what our impacts are in youth sport, what we need to find is somebody [who is doing public health research.] They're taking those metrics and measuring over time to compare, because that's really the only way we're going to know how effective we are with whatever we're implementing." (Participant 9)

Overall, the participants envisioned an OSEC that would retain its role as a trusted convening space while developing greater representation, structure, and capacity to translate relationships into collective action.

## Discussion

In this qualitative study of a youth sports equity coalition in Oakland, California (OSEC), we found that OSEC was primarily understood as a convening coalition rather than a traditional organization responsible for delivering programs or directing its members' work. Overall, the findings suggest that OSEC's current value may lie less in directly producing programs and more in creating and maintaining the relational infrastructure needed for organizations to work together. More broadly, these findings suggest that youth sports equity coalitions may create value even before they produce large-scale collective programs or policy changes by connecting organizations that might otherwise work in isolation. By creating the relationships and shared infrastructure needed for collaboration, coalitions may help fragmented youth sports systems move toward more coordinated responses to inequity while

recognizing that relationships alone may be insufficient to produce sustained change without adequate capacity, structure, and support.

The findings also provide an opportunity to consider how OSEC structure and function relate to established theories of coalition development and health equity. The CCAT and the HEF informed the study's initial framework, whereas inductive analysis allowed concepts beyond these frameworks to emerge from participants' accounts. Comparing the findings with these frameworks therefore provides context for both the aspects of OSEC that align with established models and those that may extend beyond them.

OSEC's structure both aligns with and diverges from the coalition processes described by CCAT. The CCAT conceptualizes coalition development as a progression involving the community context, convening, membership, leadership, structures, member engagement, resource pooling, planning, implementation, and community outcomes.[5]OSEC demonstrated several of these elements, particularly convening, cross-sector membership, member engagement, and collaborative relationships, but participants described fewer formal structures around roles, decision-making, and implementation.[5]Importantly, this lack of formalization has not prevented collective action. OSEC has facilitated collaboration among member organizations and created opportunities to work together toward shared goals. However, participants largely described these efforts as emerging from relationships between individual organizations rather than from coordinated activities led or structured by OSEC itself. The potential of these relationships extends beyond individual partnerships, as the collective impact literature suggests that organizations working toward a shared goal may achieve greater impact when their efforts are connected and mutually reinforcing rather than pursued independently.[6]This may represent an opportunity for OSEC to build upon its relational foundation by incorporating an additional coordinating structure to help connect and sustain the collaborative efforts already occurring among members.[5]

The importance of these relationships can also be considered through the lens of the HEF, which identifies relationships and networks as important spheres of influence through which health equity can be promoted. [3] The HEF conceptualizes relationships as social connections that can provide support and promote health equity while also recognizing that networks can reinforce the stigma, discrimination, and social pressures that contribute to inequity.[3] For OSEC, this suggests that the equity potential of relationships among coalition members may depend not only on the benefits they provide to members themselves but also on how these connections are extended to the youth and families they serve. OSEC has already connected organizations and supported collaborations that have emerged under its umbrella. Encouraging members to extend these connections to the communities they serve could create opportunities to connect youth to programs beyond their immediate organizations and broaden opportunities for participation across different sports.

However, doing so may introduce tensions between organizational interests and collective goals, particularly if there is concern that expanding the network could redistribute visibility or resources across

members. This tension between collaboration and competition is not unique to OSEC, as organizations operating within the same community may be simultaneously expected to coordinate while competing for limited resources and other organizational benefits. [7] Bunger suggested that trust between organizations can mitigate the negative effects of competition on coordination, with opportunities to interact, share information, and develop relationships that help build the trust needed for more meaningful collaboration.[8] OSEC has already created many of these opportunities through its convening role and existing relationships among member organizations. The incorporation of a greater coordinating structure within OSEC could build upon this foundation by creating more consistent opportunities for members to work together intentionally, engaging less active members and distributing some of the burden of planning and implementing collaborative activities across the broader coalition.

The participants were broadly aligned around the importance of youth sports equity, although organizations differed in the specific priorities they emphasized and how they believed equity should be achieved. Importantly, these differences did not reflect fundamentally different understandings of equity but rather the distinct experiences, populations, and organizational roles that members brought to the coalition. This shared underlying value may represent an important strength of coalition organizing, allowing organizations with different priorities to work toward a common goal without requiring complete agreement on how that goal should be achieved. The HEF emphasizes that health equity involves fair access to the resources and opportunities needed to achieve the best possible physical, emotional, and social well-being. [3] Viewed through this lens, OSEC members appeared to share a broad commitment to creating more equitable opportunities for youth while differing in how they understood the most important barriers and strategies for achieving that goal.

This distinction was particularly apparent in participants' critical responses to OSEC's goal of increasing volunteerism, particularly among coaches. The literature has documented socioeconomic inequalities in volunteering, with individuals who possess greater economic, social, and occupational resources generally being more likely to participate in formal volunteer activities. [8] Research has also cautioned that conventional approaches to volunteering can privilege middle-class forms of participation while overlooking contributions from working-class communities through less formal forms of community engagement.[9] For OSEC, this raises an important distinction between seeking community members who are willing to contribute and ensuring that the mechanisms through which they contribute are accessible to the communities the coalition seeks to represent. Participants' critiques of volunteerism may therefore be understood not as a rejection of collective participation but as an effort to ensure that participation itself is equitable.

OSEC's willingness to reconsider this goal in response to member feedback represents an important strength of the coalition. Rather than treating its initial goals as fixed, the coalition has demonstrated a willingness to reassess whether its strategies align with the equity values shared by its members. This iterative process is consistent with CCAT's emphasis on ongoing assessment, planning, member engagement, and adaptation as coalitions develop and implement strategies. [5] More broadly, the

findings suggest that shared values may provide the foundation for coalition action, whereas continued dialogue among members is necessary to determine whether specific strategies reflect those values in practice. For OSEC, maintaining this willingness to question and revise its approach may be particularly important, as the coalition seeks to ensure that its efforts to advance equity do not inadvertently reproduce the same social and economic barriers it aims to address.

OSEC's ability to act was also shaped by structural conditions extending beyond the coalition itself. HEF emphasizes that inequities emerge through interactions among structural, relational, individual, and historical influences, including systems of power that shape access to resources and opportunities.[3] These findings suggest that addressing youth sports inequities may require changes beyond individual organizations and coalition activity itself. Similarly, the CCAT recognizes that the community context, including geography, economics, politics, history, and community norms, can influence coalition development and functioning.[5] Although these structural conditions can slow progress toward OSEC goals, the broader context of collective action in Oakland may also motivate members to continue working toward change. Thus, while OSEC may help address some of the relational and organizational barriers within Oakland's youth sports system, many of the inequities its members seek to address are rooted in broader historical, political, and structural conditions that extend beyond the coalition's current capacity to change.

Taken together, a comparison with CCAT and HEF suggests that OSEC's approach does not necessarily need to conform to a traditional model of coalition development to create value. OSEC has demonstrated that focusing on relationships, shared values, and a flexible convening structure can create an important foundation for collaboration across a fragmented youth sports system. Moreover, both frameworks highlight areas in which this foundation could be strengthened, particularly by developing structures that help relationships translate into sustained action and by ensuring that coalition strategies remain responsive to changes in broader structural and social conditions, producing inequity in Oakland. [5,3] Rather than fundamentally changing OSEC's relational character, its future development may therefore involve building enough structure to support the collective action already emerging from these relationships. In this way, OSEC may represent a more flexible approach to coalition-building than the more clearly articulated developmental pathway described by CCAT.

### Limitations

This research focused on a single community coalition in Oakland, California, and the findings may not be transferable to all youth sports equity coalitions or community partnerships. However, this case study provides an in-depth understanding of how coalition members perceive OSEC's role, strengths, and challenges. Second, the interviews were conducted only with coalition members and organizational stakeholders and therefore do not reflect the perspectives of youth, parents, or other community members who may have experienced OSEC's work differently. Finally, this study captures coalition members' perspectives at one point in time. Because community coalitions evolve as leadership, membership, and community priorities change, future longitudinal research and quantitative research

could provide additional insight into how coalition development changes over time, as well as measuring coalition outcomes.

## Conclusion

In this qualitative study of OSEC, a youth sports equity coalition in Oakland, California, we found that the coalition's primary value lies in building relationships across a fragmented youth sports system, creating opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and connection. Moreover, capacity constraints, uneven engagement, and broader structural barriers limited the coalition's ability to translate these relationships into sustained collective action. These findings suggest that coalitions addressing complex inequities may benefit from balancing flexibility with sufficient structure to actively sustain engagement and encourage relationship formation. By connecting organizations, community members, and resources across fragmented systems, coalitions may also serve as an informal safety net, helping ensure that those who might otherwise fall through the gaps are caught by that web and connected to community-wide resources that have been familiarized by the broader network. Future research should examine whether these relational networks translate into measurable changes in youth sports access and equity and whether this model can be applied in other communities.

## Abbreviations

**BIPOC**: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

**CCAT**: Community Coalition Action Theory

**COREQ**: Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research

**HEF**: Health Equity Framework

**OSEC**: Oakland Sports Equity Coalition

**PCA**: Positive Coaching Alliance

## Declarations

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of California, Berkeley Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS Protocol ID #2025-03-18367). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and applicable institutional and federal regulations. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Participants were informed of the study purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits and were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or leave the interview at any point.

## Consent for publication

Participants were informed that study findings may be published or presented and that individual names and other personally identifiable information would not be used. Interview transcripts were de-identified by removing names and other personal identifiers, and quotations included in this manuscript are presented without direct identifiers.

## Availability of data and materials

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available because the interview data contain potentially identifiable information about participants and their organizations. Deidentified data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to institutional and ethical restrictions.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.


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## Authors' contributions

E.T. conceived and designed the study, developed the interview guide, conducted interviews, analyzed and interpreted the data, and drafted the manuscript. C.O. contributed to study implementation, conducted interviews, double-coded the transcripts, and contributed to data analysis, interpretation, and manuscript revision. H.T. contributed to study conceptualization and development, facilitated the initial introduction of the research team to the Positive Coaching Alliance and Oakland Sports Equity Coalition leadership, provided methodological supervision and mentorship throughout the study, and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. S.D. contributed to study conceptualization and interpretation of findings and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.


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**Clinical trial number**

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